

Hispanic Heritage Month Presentation

October 1, 2025, City Council Meeting

Written and presented by Councilor Morella Mora

As we move into October, we are coming to the end of our harvest season here, in the Columbia River Gorge.

Across our fruit orchards, vineyards, packing warehouses, dairies and ranches; Washington State is home to over 120,000 agricultural workers at the height of the harvest season.

Thousands of which live and work here in the Gorge. 98% of the men and women that comprise this workforce are Latino; 83% being of Mexican descent. The agricultural industry contributes 20 billion dollars per year into the revenue of Washington state. 130 million of which comes out of Klickitat County. It is the central economic engine of our county.



The needs of these farmworkers are tied to the needs and challenges of our communities. Their health safety in the workplace, their long hours and low wages, their access to



services, their housing, and the harassment and retaliation they face in the workplace; tells the story of how we come to enjoy such abundance in our farmers markets, in our grocery stores and in the meals we make in our kitchens. So who are the hands that feed us?

When I first moved to the Gorge four years ago I arrived on one of the oldest pear farms in Underwood mountain. My first job here was in agricultural work. Pruning trees. Cutting vines. picking pears and grapes. I lived in a fixed up barn, next to a Mexican family that had worked the property for decades; Maria and Pedro, their

children and their neighbor, Don Santos. They took me in as family. In the evenings, Maria would walk over with a plate of homemade food for me from that evening's supper. It was under their generous guidance, first generation Mexican immigrants and migrant workers, that made the possibility of living here seem like less of a dream and more of a reality. Since that time I have met dozens of farmworkers. They are amongst the kindest, most hardworking and talented group of people I have ever had the privilege of encountering, working alongside and calling family.

I want to tell you a little bit about the work that goes into harvest season here in the Gorge. And I want to tell you the story of Don Santos. My mentor and friend.

Pear harvesting is hard work. Farmers who pick, get up anywhere from 4 to 5am to be actively picking in the orchard by 6am. They do these early hours to beat the heat. They finish around 3 in the afternoon and some go back out in the early evening, when the air has cooled, to continue their work.

They strap bags to themselves that weigh about 40 pounds once full before dumping them into their bins. They have to climb ladders and usually walk uphill to fill their sacks. The work is detailed, for organic farming especially; you must know which fruit to pick and which to drop, based on size and condition.



Each bin they fill holds 1000 pounds of pears. At the top rate, they get paid \$35 per bin. And they have to work fast. They usually work in teams, but some choose to work alone to make as much money as they can. They work 9 hours a day. Six days a week; for about 6 weeks, or until the harvest is done and the rain starts.

Don Santos has cared for and stewarded the land on Underwood for over 50 years.

He turned 91 this year and still works every single harvest.

He speaks no English and gives the best advice. He was my first teacher about this way of life, as he has been to many.



He moves quicker and with more ease than the people half his age working alongside him. He prefers to work in baseball caps, over cowboy hats, which are reserved for church on Sundays. He has the roughest and most delicate hands. When I look at them I try to imagine the thousands of pieces of fruit that have passed through them. He prefers to work without gloves. Tells me they get in his way, that he “needs to feel the fruit.”

He claims to never get cut or scraped. His secret? A old rancher 's trick he learned as a boy in Mexico; “La grasa de vaca que pongo en mis manos cada noche.” The cow fat I lather on my hands every night.

He works quietly and alone. Sometimes he sings. And if you can make him laugh, he may even let you stick around and help him fill his bins.

I hope in a time when this community feels uncertain and unsafe in the homes they have created in the land they have cared for; we can show up for them. See them as the generative members of the community that they are. And continue to keep each other safe in our shared home.

